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Accretion, angst and antidote: the transition from knowledge worker to manager in the UK heritage sector in an era of austerity

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Introduction

The transition from worker to manager requires "a profound psychological adjustment – a transformation of professional identity" (Hill, 2004, p. 121). The transition from knowledge worker to manager of knowledge workers is particularly difficult. Some professionals find it "a big transition" or "a quantum leap" (Corlett, 2009, p. 150), whilst others "simply cannot adjust to a managerial life style" (Raelin, 1991, p. 186). This chapter present vignettes from a small sample of interviews of a group of knowledge workers – heritage managers in the UK – on their career progressions during turbulent times following global financial crisis of 2007-2008. These heritage managers began working together as advisors to a community-led heritage organisation, though their day jobs and earlier careers are in separate organisations. Each of them was interviewed twice, the first time to gain their individual perspectives on the formation of the community-led heritage organisation that they were contributing to, and the second time to explore their own career progression and how it had led them to work together. The semi-structured interviews took place in 2013 and were part of a longitudinal case study.

Based on our findings, we argue that the idea of accretion may be more useful than career progression in this context and that knowledge workers need greatest support when they cross the chasm to line manage other knowledge workers from multiple professional backgrounds. We also find that public sector managers are having to cope with the repercussions of the global financial crisis, in the form of the austerity policies of the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. They feel a sense of angst about the negative pre-occupation with repeated cycles of cost saving, staff loss and service reductions within their own organisations. However, perhaps ironically, they find an antidote in contributing to external partnerships that are emerging, at least in part, due to associated austerity policies promoting community leadership. This chapter first introduces the long-term and recent context, and the case study in which the heritage managers are involved. It then introduces the heritage managers and explores their career progression, including the point where they work together in the case study organisation. Finally it briefly discusses their experiences in relation to the literature on career progression and summarises the organisational and personal consequences.

Context

The broad context for the case is a long term trend of the third sector taking on ever greater responsibility for public service delivery in the UK (Macmillan, 2010). This began in the 1990s under a Conservative government where a 'contract culture' saw the third sector as alternative providers to the state. It expanded rapidly under the New Labour government of 1997-2010, where a 'partnership culture' saw the third sector as partners in the delivery of a large range and ever increasing volume of public service delivery that aspired to create synergy, transformation and/or budget enlargement (Powell & Dowling, 2006). Most recently the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government since 2010 has placed great emphasis on the Big Society which not only continues the policy of devolving public service delivery to the third sector, but also empowers communities, not the state or the professionals it employs, to become the leaders, decision makers and policy setters (Alcock, 2010).

The recent context for the case is the ongoing repercussions of the global financial crisis of 2007-08 and the era of austerity in the public sector that has resulted. In the UK this began in 2010 when the newly elected coalition government began a programme of major cuts to public sector spending (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). The hardest hit area of the public sector has been local government (LGA, 2013b) and the hardest hit area of local government are all non-statutory services that are not legally required to be provided (LGA, 2013a). Within this context, museums and heritage are more generally "easy targets" (Newman & Tourle, 2013).

This case study focuses on a heritage-based, third sector organisation – the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum located in the North East of England (http://www.flodden1513.com). When the initial group of community leaders met five years ago, their sole point of focus was to do something to commemorate an anniversary of a significant historical event – the battle of Flodden. Three things quickly emerged: firstly, many local community groups were already planning a wide range of events to mark the anniversary; secondly, though there was one place that acted as a focal point for the historical event, the full story actually involved many places and some mechanism was needed to include them in all; thirdly, to successfully apply for grant funding to commemorate the anniversary, the organisers would have to think about legacy beyond the anniversary itself. In response, an ecomuseum was set up. Rather than a traditional museum – a building, filled with objects, interpreted by specialist curators, to which the public are admitted – an ecomuseum is a community-led 'museum without walls' that cares for and makes accessible a place, including the landscape, buildings, objects, wildlife, traditions and myths (Davis 2011). The organisation is now a community enterprise, formally not-for-profit limited company, that has successfully won three successively larger grants of £35,000, £85,000 and £875,000. At the core of the ecomuseum is a network of forty one sites and a website that creates a public interface. Grant funded projects have delivered community archaeology (excavations, metal detecting, field walking) and community documentary research (transcriptions of medieval documents) both aimed at learning more about the historical event, as well as an extensive schools learning programme. There has also been an

intense media campaign to raise the profile of the historic event and the ecomuseum, as a sustainable economic development tool to attract visitors to the area.

Heritage managers and their careers

Four heritage managers were invited by the community leaders to take part in this ecomuseum endeavour. Their role was not to take over and lead, nor to provide the funding, but to advise on the general development path, fundraising, project management and to contribute the specialist professional knowledge. They are all mid-career, middle managers, but they work for different organisations: three of them work for two different unitary local authorities, whilst the fourth works for a third sector organisation that delivers museum, archive and other cultural services[1].

The careers of these different knowledge workers share a common trajectory with similar steps. The following sections use quotes from the interviewees to explore some of the dimensions of their changing roles.

Career foundations: knowledge workers

Though all four of these managers have responsibility for heritage professionals and service delivery, they have quite different professional roots. All of them started as knowledge workers (Horibe, 1999; Amar, 2002) but in various areas: two of them as heritage professionals, one as a museum curator and the other as an archaeologist. The third began as a marketing professional and the fourth, as a sport professional. Their early careers were built on very solid, hard won foundations. All four have a first degree in their specialism and one also has a PhD. Three out of the four were also members of their respective professional bodies at the start of their careers, though this was not a requirement for any of them.

Gaining initial full time professional employment was also difficult and usually required experience that had to be gained by volunteer work or short term temporary contracts. The museum curator had to take a temporary post involving moving house with the costs associated. After this ended there was a hiatus with no further positions available. The archaeologist began by running their own business, working as a self-employed draftsman and surveyor for larger more established field work contractors on large projects. The marketing professional began with a six month contract, followed by temporary maternity cover. Finally the sport professional began with a one year fixed-term contract.

In summary, entry into their chosen fields of knowledge worker involved overcoming significant barriers. However, all four heritage managers had positive memories of their early professional careers. One interviewee had started their career as a curator and spoke of their first museum, which they were in charge of setting up, with distinct pride as "a superb little museum". The marketing professional said:

[1] It delivers services that were until recently delivered directly by one of the local authorities.

> *I can remember starting at my first job, I was the most junior member of staff, where I did EVERYTHING on a project, answering the phone, doing the press releases, it was absolutely brilliant.*

So whilst entry into their professions was hard, the early jobs were universally found to be enjoyable.

Early management responsibilities

All interviewees considered that they began managing very early in their careers, during their first jobs. This was in part due to professional isolation requiring professional advice and some decisions to be made unsupported, for example one interviewee said:

> *effectively I was the only person working in museums, though I had a line manager that who had no museums experience, so it was basically 'get on with it' and that has largely been my experience."*

It was also the result of the nature of the professional work, which whilst being knowledge based, essentially involved a significant amount of management tasks. As an example of this, the self-employed archaeologist started to win larger contracts that required significant project management of tasks, budgets and deadlines, but the other three interviewees also had what might be generalised as project management responsibilities.

Leading knowledge workers

The point at which these four heritage managers began line managing staff varied hugely, from six months to over ten years and universally they all began by line managing people from their own professions. This first step in managing knowledge workers was relatively seamless. Whilst all interviewees where aware when it happened and some reflected self-critically on this moment, they all took it in their stride. With the benefit of hindsight they do not appear to think that this was a major step. However, the more significant step on the career ladder came when they began leading staff from different professional backgrounds, as one interview put it "I do recognise that as a specific point in time". This happened consistently later, between almost ten years to almost twenty years after the start of their careers.

For three out of four of the heritage managers, there was a self-conscious move to leave their own professional behind and learn about the new profession that they are responsible for. The curator said:

> *I have taken a step back. What I've tried to do is improve my professional knowledge of the other disciplines, so I would concentrate on going to their professional gatherings.*

These three interviewees also started to perceive themselves more as generalists as this time. The marketing professional stated that

> *they didn't want anyone who knew anything about running a museum or Anglo-Saxon Britain, they wanted someone who could run a charity, with all the fundraising, marketing, personnel, financial management type stuff, and to be a figurehead.*

Whilst the sport professional came to realise that:

> *I can't cram 25-30 years of knowledge and academic study that these guys have got into two to three years because it's in my job description. … It's not about knowing everything, it's doing the right thing.*

These three heritage managers were also keen to take on the challenge of general management, in the words of one of them "I was ready for it. I was very, very pleased to get that job". This was in part a sense of repulsion, for example one interview said that "I felt I'd taken museums as far as I could", but more significantly it was a sense of attraction towards a new challenge. So from pragmatic point of view it was simply the opportunity to take decisions and build the strategy was and this "being involved at a much higher level" was enjoyable. So in summary, three out of the four interviewees were positive about this move completely away from their own professional backgrounds and towards managing people from diverse professional backgrounds.

The story of the fourth interviewee, the person who started as an archaeologist, is quite different. Whilst this person has taken on a general management role and now manages people from a number of different professional backgrounds, in their own words they "resent" this transition. The reason this person made the move is in part because they felt that "somebody has to", but it is also pragmatic "because I wanted the salary". The particular situation has not helped, where they took on the role:

> *we were told it was 25% management and 25% professional work. That has slipped and completely reversed, until around 2008-09. Now that 25% is getting smaller and smaller – I probably do around 5-10% professional archaeology for the local authority.*

Behind this is a deep professional attachment, where the person would like to be able to paid their current salary for being a professional archaeologist and they are dancing around this boundary. Two points illustrate this. The first is around their job title where they are proud of being called County Archaeologist and though "several bosses have tried to take it off me … I've subtly fought back". The second is dress code: this person dresses for formal office work as a team manager dressed like a field archaeologist ready to jump into a hole and start excavating at any moment, as another interviewee quite openly said, as his dress code is widely known, "I think everybody knows he's an archaeologist!" This reluctance by no means suggests that this person did not devote themselves consciously and 'professionally' to the task of this new general management role. In their own words:

> *it was a learning curve, but not hard just something that had to be done. I enjoy it, I learn a lot from my fellow professionals and we try to get them to learn from each other which is always interesting.*

So in summary, this fourth person is quite different, whilst they have taken on the role of being a general manager and appear to have devoted themselves to the task, they are overtly reluctant to leave behind their professional roots.

Leading the community

For the three local authority heritage managers, the necessity of leading communities involved began when the New Labour government was strongly encouraging the use of partnerships as a delivery across the public sector. So it was less of a voluntary step up the career ladder and more of an extra rung that was added to the ladder that had to be stepped up. For the person who has worked in the third sector, it has been a consistent part of their normal day-to-day of working. For the curator, this was actually:

> *the highlight of my career. The period when I started to take a leading role in a [major community regeneration project]. We put together a funding package of about £.6million and it took over five years to the opening of the final phase in 2009. … As we developed that project we formed a community consultation group and we met once a month, of an evening, for two years as developed the project and they became key stakeholders.*

And in terms of how this way of working is now embedded,

> *community consultation is built into so much of what we do and what we are expected to do. Also in terms of funding it has to have community support. It's far better if it's community driven.*

The archaeologist shares the positive experience of working with communities: "engaging local communities makes for richer projects". Though he is also pragmatic about the necessity to work in partnership with communities when applying to external grant-giving bodies: "of course I'm a funding whore and the community is key!" In practical terms most engagement with community groups are short, like mini-consultancy assignments often associated with fundraising. However some community engagement was longer term and in depth, one project running for a number of years and involving "delivery of training, excavation site direction, producing talk programmes and part way through taking over the management of the entire project."

Knowledge workers still

Following similar steps up the management career ladder, this section reflects on how each heritage manager feels about their original profession. Though it varied, it was quite surprising to find that all four still felt a clear sense that they were still professionals. The most obvious example is the archaeologist, who said that he "would go crazy without some professional time". The curator remains a reviewer for new entrants into the professional body and still attends the professional conference. The sport professional remains a member of his professional body and clearly still identifies himself with this profession, though now it is "just one tiny aspect" of his role. Finally, what the marketing professional

said is interesting: "I always feel like I'm a practitioner ... [though] if you were to ask me, I'd say I was a Museum Director [but] I've never felt that I've got to that stage where I can just tell other people what to do and not do it myself". More interesting still, when comparing themselves with other managers in the museum and heritage sector, they said "sometimes I regret not having a specialism ... sometimes I wish I had been the archaeologist who made it to be Director, as there's more of an interesting story in that".

So all four heritage managers remained aware of their roots and felt some legitimacy, however small, from this core knowledge and expertise. Perhaps most interesting was the view of the person who didn't consider that they had a specialism, but perhaps this is a perspective that has emerged when working in a world where professionals with strong, specialist academic backgrounds in biology, geology, archaeology and history are the norm.

Managing in an era of austerity

This final section explores the impact of the 2010 coalition government's policy of austerity that has had a significant impact in terms of budget cuts. Again the impact of these changes differs: the manager in the third sector is least affected, whilst these cuts completely dominate the discourse of the three local authority managers. As an example of the depth of feeling, this quote encapsulates the pressure:

> *Since the bankers fucked the country and the economic crisis has given Labour and the Conservative governments an excuse to give public services a kicking … the need to find savings now is becoming more and more intense. … So that's the focus of my work now, transformation and restructuring.* [which is a euphemism for making budget cuts, then dealing with the service delivery and organisational consequences]

Or as another interviewee described their day job,

> *over the past five years it's been a creeping death. More recently it's been it's cuts on cuts.*

The intense negative feelings of the three local authority managers towards their current role were palpable during the interviews. One alluded to looking for other jobs, another said "there are days when I'd like to stay in bed" and the other, who is facing dismantling what they have spent many years creating, said with typical understatement "it's not what I wanted to do in the last few years of my career!" But beyond this codified sense of angst, their non-verbal communication was telling: their body language was limp, slumped; their speech was slow and considered; they looked tired, worn down and resigned.

These three heritage managers therefore find themselves with less fluid budgets and fewer staff. They are now "not doers, but facilitators: enabling, linking people together, not delivering services." Another interviewee said "now we're not the cultural leaders, we enable people [in the community] to lead."

So within this context, it might be expected that these four heritage managers may resent their advisory role in the community-led organisation, to which they all contribute and where they work together – Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum. In many respects it seems to exemplify the way these managers now spend

their time, advising and influencing external community led projects. Yet they unanimously enjoy their input to the Ecomuseum. This is represented by comments such as "I do feel very personally attached to Flodden", "of all the projects last year, I probably felt closest to Flodden", "one of the more enjoyable parts of my job", "bright spots in a dark week" and "it's quite refreshing". What lies beneath this enjoyment of the Ecomuseum work is in part the contrast with other work, nicely encapsulated by the following quote:

> *it's a positive project, it's going forward, it's achieving something, it's establishing a legacy, it's going forward rather than making cuts.*

But their enjoyment of the Ecomuseum work also reflects the positive impact this community-led project is having, for example:

> *[originally] I was round the table at Flodden because of the potential in terms of profile for the county, how it would contribute to the visitor offer. Whereas I've seen what else it's produced: the sense of pride and how people have got behind it.*

As when talking about their internal roles, their non-verbal communication when talking about Flodden was revealing: they leaned forward, spoke faster, smiled more, were more animated. It is this body language, contrasted with their body language when talking about their day-to-day roles, that is the lingering memory of recent interviews.

The particular ways in which the four heritage managers contribute to the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum varies. All four interviewees assessed their input as overwhelming relating to their management expertise, not their professional expertise. In particular interviewees thought they contributed their knowledge and experience relating to fundraising and project management. Whilst the interviewees clearly felt their input was mainly managerial, participant observations of Steering Group meetings suggest they are consulted and give opinions on areas of professional expertise for which they are responsible (e.g. museums, archives, education, marketing and tourism). So whilst they may feel their own skills in areas such as fundraising are strategically more important and they are conscious that when serious work is required any professional area (e.g. contributing specialist planning to a fundraising application) they delegate this to subordinate specialists, they do appear to play an important day-to-day professional advisory role in the ecomuseum. Two of the local authority managers also saw their role as acting as a link and conduit of information between the ecomuseum and their respective councils, which are key partner organisations. Interestingly, they both saw this as significant and similarly emphasised a translation role, for example "quietly advising the ecomuseum on the best way to deal with the council [and] coming along to meetings and giving a view from the council". Two of the interviewees also felt they played what in their terms was a "leadership" role, not as a chairman or figurehead, but in helping to "drive the vision" and providing a "pragmatic approach to getting things done".

Discussion

Much of the literature on the transition from knowledge worker to manager of knowledge workers assumes this to be a linear process, from junior to senior roles, leaving behind the identity of the previous role at each successive progression. For example as quoted at the start of this chapter, Hill described this transition as requiring "a profound psychological adjustment – a transformation of professional identity" (2004, p. 121). However this study found that the idea of accretion may be more useful than progression, more like the formation of a pearl, with successive layers building up around the kernel of grit in the centre. The professional knowledge that was the foundation of the career continues, all be it in an ever smaller way, to form the kernel of the personal identity of the senior manager.

When the four heritage managers that are involved in the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum made the transition from knowledge workers to managers of knowledge workers, they do not seem to have experienced the "big transition" or "quantum leap" (Corlett, 2009, p. 150) described in other studies. However when they made the further transition to become managers of knowledge workers from multiple professional backgrounds, they all recognised this as a big transition or quantum leap. All four of the managers saw this as a 'natural progression' (Raelin, 1991), with three of them simply 'moving up' the hierarchy within their professional fields and only one, the person whose career began in marketing, seeing themselves as a 'career manager' (Watson and Harris, 1999).

Yet for the senior heritage managers interviewed in this case study, their early professional careers were a matter of pride, a basis of legitimacy when managing related professionals and advising more senior staff, and finally a touchstone in the current difficult times. A more cumbersome but more accurate and resonant metaphor in this context for their accreted identities, might be a priceless object, in a bespoke mount, in a secure display case, within a museum. At the centre is the priceless object (the professional career), around which are the artefacts that show it off, make sense of it, keep it secure and make it accessible.

The angst felt by the three local authority managers is mirrored elsewhere. A survey reported by the Institute of Leadership and Management (Martindale, 2013), suggests that 70% of public sector staff feel that "morale is at an all-time low and 43% want to leave their current employer". The problem is "most acute among senior managers, where 84% say morale is at a record low [and] almost one in three (32%) want to quit their job." The counterbalancing antidote of working with expanding community-led partnerships like the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum, does not appear to have been reported in trade press or academic literature yet. It is possible that the situation and nature of the Ecomuseum is unique and that this phenomenon is not seen elsewhere, or it may be that the satisfaction gained from an advisory role with community-led organisations is an emerging phenomenon that is yet to be reported more widely.

Organisational and personal consequences

According to the vignettes in this study, the main transition in the process of career accretion is not the point at which knowledge workers take on management responsibility for delivering activities, husbanding resources and hitting deadlines. Nor is it the point where knowledge workers start line managing knowledge workers, as this initial staff leadership transition feels safe. The main organisational consequence of this research is that knowledge workers need greatest support when they cross the chasm to line manage knowledge workers from multiple disciplinary backgrounds. Formal training and development systems need to be focused at supporting this most difficult and ambiguous transition, and informal line management coaching by knowledge workers that have already made the transition would be valuable.

The main personal consequence for the individuals concerned, which was quite striking when carrying out the interviews, was the deep discontentment felt by the three public sector employees in the current situation. Whilst they feel their internal facing jobs are a negative cycle of cuts and trying to optimistically manage decline, they can take heart from their external relationships, like their involvement in the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum, and responding positively to community-led initiatives (and even trying to act as the catalyst to new initiatives) may be the best route to job satisfaction.

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